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Review of Louis Althusser and the traditions of French Marxism

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Review of William S. Lewis. Louis Althusser and the Traditions of French Marxism. *Lexington Books, Lanham, 2005. pp 238.*

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William Lewis traces the emergence of Althusser, situating him in the history of French Marxism, but marking the space as a rupture. Lewis argues that the status of Marxism not only makes possible the production of Althusser's thinking, but in many ways necessitates it. He maintains that beginning in the late 1950s, the interventions of Althusser and his circle stimulated the debates that had begun to ossify and paralyze Marxist theory and practice both in Europe and globally. In order to make this argument, Lewis devotes slightly more than a quarter of the textual real estate to Althusser explicitly. Lewis's arguments about Althusser's position in Marxism require constructing a narrative of the history of French Marxism. The book gives a thorough and interesting account of the French Communist Party (*Parti Communiste Française*, or PCF) and examines its relationship to the Soviet state, and their strained, but unbroken ties. Lewis concurrently produces the history of French intellectuals with respect to the PCF and the Soviet Union, ultimately giving some purchase on the complex of factors that produce the two stagnant positions in which Marxism found itself during the 1950s: Soviet Stalinism and Marxist humanism.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union many considered Marx to have simply been proven wrong and the project of Marxism was declared dead. Against this position Jacques Derrida in *Spectres of Marx* opted to consider the possibility that the collapse of the Soviet Union might, in fact, be an event that opens up the possibility to consider Marx seriously. Derrida cites the proliferation and continued existence of Marxism*s*, along with their ability to haunt the discourse and material actions that surrounded the seeming triumph of capitalism as the only possible orienting principle of the world. Almost coincident with the death of the Soviet project was the death of Louis Althusser whose work had been seemed to occupy a place of declining interest and relevance.

Althusser's currency within the Anglo-American academy was waning in the period before his death. In the polemical debates of the 1960s and 1970s, Althusser occupied a position of controversy due to his contentious

positions on Humanist Marxism and his redefinition of ideology. The 1990s saw a flood of posthumously published texts, giving rise to a renewed interest in his work. In part, the publication of works like *Machiavelli and Us* and *Philosophy of the Encounter* that concern themselves with the aleatory, complicating and expanding Althusser's earlier interrogations into structures, have produced this interest. As the Soviet Union is no longer a convenient signifier for Marxism, these interrogations are all the more pressing to consider; they provide a rupture that has yet to be fully acknowledged or examined.

An essential part of Lewis's argument is an affirmation of the thesis that Althusser famously argued in the introduction to *Reading Capital*: when reading Marx, we read "bits of it, the 'fragments' which the conjuncture has 'selected' for us"[1] Lewis's account of the intellectual and political histories of Marxism in France reveal that Marx is read in precisely this way. Lewis argues that to the peril of the French left, the PCF read readers of readers, as it produced its positions. An emblematic example of this practice, Lewis argues, is the PCF's engagement with Stalin's "Dialectical and Historical Materialism," (the Short Course). This reading of Marx is absorbed into the policy decisions of the PCF, determining its movements. The readings that are produced in France mostly rehearse arguments that are congruent with Soviet readings of Marx. The Short Course produces determinate relations between the PCF and its members that disallow the possibility of any serious engagements with Marx's texts.

Lewis argues that the PCF repeatedly stumbled as a direct result of this lack, since because of its deference to Soviet positions on intellectuals, the PCF engendered an effective bifurcation of theory and practice. Consequently, official and unofficial philosophers such as Sartre, Lefebvre, Corneau, etc., were concerned with reconfiguring the world theoretically without a grounding in political practice. The lack of this concrete engagement with politics produced another kind of Marxism without Marx. Lewis maintains that the French intellectual left refers to the 'idea' of Marx, as it draws on Schelling, Hegel, and others to produce a Marxist humanism. Though he does not doubt the sincerity and rigor of this project, Lewis argues that Marx is little more than a pretext for it.

The PCF regularly, but not consistently, expelled intellectuals because of its adherence to Stalinist dogma, identifying them as class enemies (*petit*

[1] Althusser, Louis and Etienne Balibar. *Reading Capital* (London: Verso, 2006), 13.

bourgeois). Those intellectuals who did remain within the ranks of the PCF find themselves negating some of their former projects through the production of auto-critiques aimed at congruence with the Party leadership. Lewis argues that in many ways they became French translators of Stalinist philosophy. This practice is traced by Lewis through the intricacies of its dogmatism, and he notes that it is congruent with a Stalinism best exemplified by the "Short Course." As Lewis points out, this account of 'dialectical materialism' is mobilized on the basis of a selective and oversimplified reading of the later Engels and Marx; it is a translation of the dialectic into simplified and universal terms.

Lewis drives home the fact that not only do we find a distance between the theoretical and political in the split between the PCF and the intellectuals, but that they both disregard Marx's texts by abstracting them. Lewis makes the case that this is precisely what led to the paralysis of the post-war French left when Soviet atrocities come to light during the invasion of Hungary in 1956. Intellectuals such as Sartre and and those more directly affiliated with the PCF, found themselves in the awkward position of justifying Soviet violence as a necessary component of world revolution. It is in the moment of this setback and stalemate that Lewis locates the emergence of and necessity for the philosophy of Louis Althusser.

Though Lewis marks Althusser's philosophy as not "sui generis", he sees it as an intervention in its own right and not merely "pastiche and combination (e.g., Marx + Spinoza + Mao + Lèvi-Strauss = Althusser)"[2]. Althusser is shown to be a figure whose philosophy attempts to resolve the tensions which arose from the theory/practice divide engendered both by the policies of the PCF and traditional stance of French intellectuals. Lewis continually underscores Althusser's commitment by situating his interventions as produced from within the boundaries of PCF membership. He presents a short, but helpful history of specific arguments that have become canonical selections from Althusser's corpus. The strength of this narrative lies in its ability to make reference to the historical conditions that both precede and accompany each intervention, thereby demonstrating Althusser's position as a thinker of the conjuncture.

In anticipation of the question regarding Althusser's status within the current moment, Lewis produces an argument regarding the success of

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[2] Lewis, William. *Louis Althusser and the Traditions of French Marxism*. (Lanham, MA: Lexington Books, 2005), 161.

Althusser's philosophy. This section finds him a little conflicted as he both stresses that Althusser's impact persists, and attempts to account for the pronouncement of both history and the academy. It is here that we find Lewis modestly defensive as he attempts to call into question the basis of this pronouncement. Making reference to the history that he has constructed about the French left and its relationship to the global project of Marxism, Lewis reconfigures the terrain of the debate to mark Althusser's interventions as useful in that they are able move Marxism past the ossification it experienced from the clash between Soviet Stalinism and Marxist humanism. The counterpart to this defense is an assessment of the shortcomings of Althusser's engagements mobilized by Althusser's own modulations and Lewis's critiques. Although brief, this critique of Althusser assists in filling out the schematic that Lewis develops during the earlier portion which deals with the interventions themselves. Given Lewis's previous arguments regarding the reading practice of the PCF, the brevity of his examination of Althusser's philosophy itself seems to suggest that one should look to Althusser's texts for an account of his thinking. The success of the project that Lewis undertakes lies in its production of the context in which one might read those texts.

This being said, Lewis has a slight tendency to see Althusser as already immanent in the debates that have produced the conditions of possibility for his thinking and it sometimes feels as though it is retrojecting Althusser's arrival as immanent, rather than merely possible in the objective conditions of his historical moment, as well as ours. Althusser argued that philosophy as class struggle in theory must engage in tactics appropriate to the conjuncture. In *Machiavelli and Us*, Althusser characterizes Machiavelli as a philosopher who could "think under the conjuncture" someone who "submit[ted] to the problem induced and imposed by its case."[3] Althusser also occupies this position, and Lewis makes this case through his thorough historical narrative.

[3] Althusser, Louis, *Machiavelli and Us* (London: Verso, 1999), 18.

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